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Article (Accepted Version)

Price, Jason (2019) Georges Rouault's (Un)popular clown paintings. *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 16 (3). pp. 254-266. ISSN 1746-0654

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Georges Rouault's (Un)popular Clown Paintings

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Georges Rouault's (Un)popular Clown Paintings

During the long career of French painter Georges Rouault (1871-1958), the artist is known to have created around 170 paintings featuring images of popular entertainers, most often circus performers and clowns. Painted in the artist's signature 'messy' style, the clowns depicted often appear out of their performative context and in an unhappy state that seems incongruous with their character. This article makes a case that such an approach falls under the category of *(un)popular* art, which occurs when artists appropriate and then dismantle popular images in order to construct works of high art. The author argues that while the artist's aesthetic clearly oversees a shift in the cultural status of the clown from popular to elite art, the effects of Rouault's expressionism are strongly dependent upon acknowledging the popular dimensions of the work. Reconceptualising the exchanges between certain cultural forms, such as those between popular culture forms and the avant-garde, as *(un)popular* offers a productive way of foregrounding the essential contribution popular culture has made to elite culture, and helps redress the historical prejudices which have established the popular as antithetical to works of high art.

Key words: Georges Rouault; popular culture; clowns; pierrots; low art; high art

1. 'We are all of us clowns'¹

What is striking about a portrait like *Clown* (1912) is its solemnity (Figure 1.). Dimly lit and set against an indistinguishable background, the clown is presented in dark clothing: a mixture of blacks, charcoal greys, a light dabbing of brown, and several faint blue smudges – two, of a lighter shade, appear at the top of the clown's chest and down the right side of his torso; the other, a single swipe of a darker shade occupying a place where his right underarm might begin. Were it not for his almost luminescent white hat and ruff framing his neck and face, and the warm light just catching his right side, the clown might almost disappear into his surroundings. This painting's seriousness is also communicated through its composition. Taking up the full canvas, the clown is shown in a classic portrait pose. His torso is straight and upright, his head is turned to the left and his reddish, folded hands are just visible above the painting's bottom edge. The one eye visible to us is a black hole; its precise imprecision thwarting any attempt at clarifying the figure's mood. Not that such clarification is necessary.

¹ This brief quotation comes from a letter Georges Rouault wrote to Edouard Schuré in 1905. See Dyrness 1971, 149. A fuller extract appears later in the article.

The painting, which is constructed of thick, dark oils applied deliberately roughly, articulates a mood clearly enough. This clown is uncharacteristically joyless.

By 1912, the year Georges Rouault (1871-1958) painted *Clown*, the French artist had been drawing upon images of clowns, Pierrots and other popular entertainers for nearly a decade. Prior to this, Rouault's work tended toward more religious and classical subjects, with a style influenced by Eugène Delacroix, Théodore Chassériau, Rembrandt, and other major artists he was introduced to during his time as a student at the L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1890 and 1895. These more traditional leanings can be seen in his paintings *The Ordeal of Samson* (1893), *The Child Jesus among the Doctors* (1894) and *Night Landscape* (1897). Of these three, it is only in the harsh haziness and figurative imprecision of *Night Landscape* that we can begin to see evidence of a style that would reach maturity with *Clown*. What bridges Rouault's early development with his later aesthetic – and the first appearance of clowns – is a series of personal and moral crises, culminating in a severe mental and physical breakdown in 1902. Following his recovery, he was no longer able or willing to contemplate continuing with the aesthetic path he had been on. The art historian and curator Sarah Whitfield notes that the painter became 'disgusted [...] with his sombre style of painting. Restored to health, he set about changing everything, his subject, his technique, his palette' (Hergott and Whitfield 1993, 12). In place of mythical or religious figures, were clowns and prostitutes; in place of canvas and oils – paper, watercolour, gouache, ink, crayon, and petroleum. By the time of the infamous 1905 exhibition at the Salon d'Automne, where Rouault would show his work alongside the soon-to-be branded 'Fauves' (Matisse, Marquet, Derain, Vlaminck, Manquin and Camoin)² Rouault was

² Although Rouault was friends with Matisse and Marquet (and they had all been taught by the symbolist painter, Gustave Moreau, at L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts), Rouault did not consider himself to be a Fauve; it was the critics that had made the classification mistakenly (Soby 1947, 14). Fiercely independent, Rouault did not wish to belong to any movement or artistic school.

working exclusively in his new technique. While his aesthetic would change materially and stylistically over the course of his long career, his use of clowns, circus performers and other popular figures in his paintings remained consistent.³

While Rouault is certainly not alone in giving his attention to clowns in this period, there are two issues that make his treatment of the subject unique. The first includes the scale of his output. Between 1902 and 1956, Rouault produced around 170 individual works of art about clowns or other show people, which is a significant portion of his collection.⁴ The second issue concerns the artist's method: his deliberate compositional distortion of his subjects through the use of deep hues, inky lines, or thickly encrusted oils. Through this act of clown iconoclasm – or, *clownoclasm* – Rouault not only transformed the image of the clown into something unfamiliar and alien to audiences, his approach oversaw a shift of the cultural status of the figure from popular (or low) art into high. In this, Rouault's work offers a prime example of a particular kind of effect that can occur in works by artists who appropriate popular forms, which has been discussed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his well-known book *Distinction* (1984). Where such appropriation occurs and the outcome is not intended to be popular but high art, Bourdieu writes that the

aesthete [...] introduces a gap [...] by displacing the interest from the 'content', characters, plot, etc., to the form, to the specificity of artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through the comparisons with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the work immediately given. (Bourdieu 1984, 26)

By displacing 'content' from the popular form the artist can use its shell in order to produce alternative aesthetic affects more befitting their 'high' artistic goals, and more suited to those audiences. Because the effects and potential meanings such artworks are able to produce are

³ For a small sample of Rouault's circus paintings, see:

http://www.rouault.org/site/ENGLISH/oeuvres/le_cirque.html

⁴ According to Dyrness's audit, Rouault produced 169 artworks on a circus theme between 1902 and 1956 (1971, 147).

substantially based on the artist's juxtaposition of popular and unpopular formal elements, I have come to refer to this kind of art as being (un)popular – a term which recognises the centrality of the popular in an otherwise high art aesthetic. In this specific configuration, the parenthetical 'un' operates to clarify the aesthetic status of the object (it is *un-popular*), but allows the appropriated popular form's essential contribution to the aesthetic to be simultaneously recognised. It is not dissimilar to Renée M. Silverman's concept of the 'popular avant-garde' (2010), Jeffrey Weiss's 'the popular culture of modern art' (1994), or Juan A. Suárez's 'pop modernism' (2007) – all of which are critical attempts to recognise the productive exchanges that took place between popular culture and avant-garde artists. The crucial difference between my own formulation and that of these scholars is that the (un)popular does not insist upon exclusively avant-garde or modernist connections. Rather, it is a term that is intended to be embracing of the popular as it manifests into any elite art configuration.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Rouault's clown paintings operate as (un)popular art. In order to do this, I will first show how his work might be classified as high art. To support my categorisation, I will draw primarily on two vintage critical perspectives: the American art critic Clement Greenberg and his seminal essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'; and the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's 'The Dehumanization of Art'. While Greenberg may seem an odd choice here given his distaste of Rouault's work⁵, I have chosen to anchor my analysis with his and Gasset's essays because the ideas they put forward are still relevant to how we understand artistic status since modernism. My usage of these authors' work is to establish criteria by which we might define Rouault's avant-gardism and, consequently, the elite status of his art. Having established its cultural status, I then turn my

⁵ In his 1945 essay on Rouault, Greenberg would write: 'That Rouault [...] should be hailed as the one profoundly religious painter of our time is one of the embarrassments of modern art' (Greenberg 1989, 86).

attention to the clowns and the popular traditions Rouault drew upon and responded to. In its final pages, the essay interrogates the effects of Rouault's (un)popular clowns and what his *clownoclasm* might invite viewers to do.

2. 'All modern art is unpopular'⁶

Greenberg's essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', originally published in 1939, argues that the role of the avant-garde was to keep art moving amongst the 'ideological confusion and violence' brought about by capitalism (Greenberg 2003, 541). In order to do this, the avant-garde needed to separate itself from society so as to minimise infection from the bourgeoisie. 'Isolated', the avant-garde looked to itself – and the processes of making art – for inspiration. As a consequence, this art became 'valid solely on its own terms', possessing its own logic and deriving essential meanings from within itself (ibid.). 'Content is to be dissolved so completely into form,' Greenberg writes, 'that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself' (ibid.). Kitsch, on the other hand, Greenberg refers to as the 'rear-garde' (543). This was popular and commercial art developed to pacify the industrial working class and their newly acquired literacy (ibid.). Because it 'imitate[d] the effects of good art' (546) but could be 'enjoyed without effort' (548), kitsch became the nineteenth-century culture of the masses. Clowns and the genres they populated during Rouault's lifetime, such as pantomime or circus, are prime contenders for kitsch status.

Written in 1925, Gasset's 'The Dehumanization of Art' also makes the clear distinction between an art for the elite and an art for the masses. He suggests that one of the functions of modern art was to 'help the elite to recognise themselves and one another in the drab mass of society and to learn their mission which consists in being few and holding their

⁶ This is a quote from José Ortega y Gasset's 'The Dehumanization of Art'. See Gasset 2003, 324.

own against the many' (Gasset 2003, 325).⁷ Modern art was therefore unpopular by design. One of the ways the new art achieved discrimination was through its tendency toward 'dehumanisation', by which Gasset means aesthetic strategies which seek to prevent engagement with the art object on an ordinary human level. If a popular audience seeks human relations in their art, looking for stories, emotions or pathos as an invitation to participate in the decoding of the work, then the new art deliberately side-stepped or frustrated their attempts to do this. Possessing 'curious iconoclastic urges', Gasset notes, the modern artist could still feature human forms in his or her art, but they were presented in abstracted patterns in order to de-familiarize them (2003, 328–329).

If we apply Greenberg's and Gasset's general criteria, it is possible to make a case for Rouault's avant-gardism and his art's subsequent elite status. The first qualifier is the artist's concern for the social consequences of capitalism. He was known to be profoundly distrustful of the modern world (most especially of the bourgeoisie) and longed for a simpler time.⁸ In disassociating himself as far as possible from society – one of Greenberg's criteria for an avant-garde – he could produce his art to his own motivations and preferences. The second qualifier also stems from Greenberg and his assessment that avant-garde art is preoccupied with its own processes of construction. In Rouault's paintings, the process of construction is clearly made visible through his use of messy, swirling inky lines, dabbed brush strokes, and thickly encrusted paint. In my assessment, the paintings reveal, if not *re-perform*, their making each time they are viewed. The third qualifier is based on Gasset's privileging of 'dehumanised' aesthetics in modern art. While Rouault himself would have taken issue with the notion that his approach 'dehumanised' his subjects, a point I will return to later, the

⁷ This formulation is also later used by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Distinction* (1984). In his study, Bourdieu writes that one of the goals of high art is to 'fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences' (1984, xxx).

⁸ Whitfield has noted, for instance, that this anti-modern 'rebelliousness shows itself in his urge to disassociate himself from his own time' (Hergott and Whitfield 1993, 11).

public's profoundly negative reaction to what one critic referred to as Rouault's 'dark mistakes', suggests a disparity between intent and interpretation (quoted in Schloesser 2005, 217). Even his friend, the Catholic writer Leon Bloy, himself known for violent and shocking imagery, was horrified by Rouault's paintings and once referred to the figures appearing in them as 'atrocious and avenging caricatures' (quoted in Schloesser 2005, 218). His work was therefore not only unpopular in terms of its aesthetic and target audience, for roughly the first half of his career his work was unpopular in the most familiar sense of that term.

The final qualifier concerns the artist's independence. Rouault was fiercely independent, and this extended into his artistic alliances, with the artist reluctant to signal allegiance to any particular avant-garde movement or school of thought. It is usually this fact which complicates a straightforward classification of his art as being avant-garde. There were points where his work had been grouped together with other artists, include the Fauves and Cubists, but he professed to be neither. Of the major avant-garde arts movements operative at the time, Rouault is typically considered to be expressionist – a term we know Rouault did not mind (but also did not totally endorse). As Joshua Kind has explained, the 'melancholy expressionist' typically responded favourably to the expressionist style and use of vibrant colours, but not its primitive subject matter (1969, 5). Rouault reserved this place for contemporary figures – such as clowns, prostitutes and judges – through which he could express his views on the modern world which were heavily informed by his devout Catholic faith. His expressionist paintings were consequently intended to be religious, which further set him apart from many of his artistic peers. So even within the field of expressionist painting, Rouault positioned himself on its margins through his choice of subject matter and the intent behind his art.

There are other qualifiers we might use to classify Rouault's work (e.g. the aesthetic, critical attention, the galleries his work was displayed in, etc.), but for our purposes here

Greenberg's and Gasset's essays have provided a more than ample platform for demonstrating Rouault's avant-gardism and, consequently, his work's high art status. Having established the features that make his work unpopular in the genuine sense, let us now take a closer look at the traditions and icons that give Rouault's (un)popular art its popular dimension.

3. The malleable outsider

Much has been written about the clown in nineteenth-century France and the unique role they occupied that enabled them to serve multiple audiences, classes, political perspectives and cultural forms.⁹ While it is not within the scope of the present study to revisit the rich history that produced such a complex, culturally malleable figure, it is worth momentarily reviewing its arguably most famous personality, Pierrot, and the generation of the 'sad clown' myth – a myth with which Rouault appears to be engaging.

Pierrot's origins can be traced to seventeenth-century *commedia dell'arte* when an Italian company, the *Comedie Italiene*, were resident in France.¹⁰ Unlike other *commedia zanni*¹¹, like Harlequin, Pierrot was from the beginning a more subdued servant character, strongly – and often stupidly – driven by his love for the beautiful Columbina. He was also unmasked (another break with *zanni* tradition) and featured the white painted face of the actor in place of the more familiar leather half-mask. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the character appeared widely in popular entertainments across Europe, showing up in plays, Harlequinades, marionette performances and in fairground attractions. The character

⁹ I would recommend Louisa E. Jones' *Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots* (1984), which remains one of the most authoritative texts on the subject.

¹⁰ It is sometimes suggested that Pierrot derived from another *commedia* character, Pedrolino, because of similarities between their costumes. This is no definitive evidence to verify this link. Indeed, apart from their costume, the characters are so fundamentally different that it is hard to see one as an adaptation of the other.

¹¹ Zanni is the term used to qualify the comic servant characters of the *commedia dell'arte*.

also began to feature in paintings during this period, notably in Antoine Watteau's *Gilles* (1718). Pierrot's popularity increased with French audiences in the nineteenth century as a consequence of Parisian appetite for pantomime and, perhaps more especially, the actor Jean-Gaspard Deburau's interpretation of the character. The star of the Théâtre des Funambules in the 1820s and 1830s, Deburau's Pierrot placed emphasis on the character's more romantic tendencies and worked to eliminate any remaining coarseness the character may have inherited from other commedia *zanni*. As part of this transformation, Deburau took away the character's voice, making him mute, and altered his visage, removing his signature white ruff and hat (in its place, a skullcap). Instead of an unsophisticated, crude zanni, the novelist George Sand referred to Deburau's creation as both 'gracious' and 'reasonable', with the 'impartiality of an enlightened judge and [the] grace of a Marquis' (quoted in Nye 2014, 110). Deburau's appeal far exceeded a traditional popular audience. In her essay, 'Painted Smiles: Sad Clowns in French Art in Literature', curator Helen Borowitz notes that Deburau received attention from a number of important critics and writers during his lifetime, including a biography written for him by the influential writer and drama critic Jules Janin (1984, 24). More broadly, Deburau's celebrity resulted in a critical interest in the pantomime form and its commedia ancestor. Indeed, as Haskell confirms, 'the pantomime was made to support a whole philosophy of life', with some critics seeing the archetypal characters as a 'microcosm of the human condition' (1972, 9).¹² Even after Deburau's death in 1846, both pantomime and Pierrot would continue to be popular with the public, largely through the efforts of Deburau's son – Jean-Charles Deburau – and the actor Paul Legrand, both of whom

¹² Several critics even tried their hand at writing pantomimes in order to explore some of these philosophical discoveries. The art critic and novelist Champfleury, for instance, used the pantomime form and Pierrot character to apply the theories of eighteenth-century Swedish philosopher and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, whose writing and ideas were enjoying a revival at the time. The result was *Pierrot, Valet of Death* which received a full professional production in 1847.

became famous Pierrots in their own right. It is usually Legrand who is credited with the further transformation of the character into the tearful, sentimental clown that is still familiar to us today. The figure's popularity with the French public would extend well into the early decades of the twentieth century.

Through their popularity with high and lowbrow audiences alike, Pierrot and other clowns became a common subject in French art and literature throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Take, for instance, Jean-Léon Gèrôme's painting *Duel After the Masquerade* (1857), which presents a recently stabbed and now dying Pierrot in a snow-covered early morning landscape. Or, Thomas Couture's *The Duel After the Masked Ball*, also from 1857, which appears to show the moments leading up to Gèrôme's painting, from a different perspective. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's 1886 painting *Clown*, a grey monochrome figure on a nearly bare canvas, presents us with another example. But others are not difficult to come by: Daumier, Degas, Seurat, Renoir, Monet, Cézanne, and others all painted Pierrots, circus and other clown types. The clown was equally popular amongst writers in the period. Take, for instance, the disfigured Gwynplaine from Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs* (1869), or Henri Rivière's aspiring mime and psychopath Charles Servieux from his novella *Pierrot* (1860), as just two examples. In short, locating a Pierrot or other clown character in French art in this period is not difficult to do.

As this whistle-stop tour of Pierrot and his on- and off-stage uses demonstrates, the figure possessed an appeal that very much appears to have operated across class lines in nineteenth-century France. Such was the figure's social transversability it could be interpreted, as discussed, as being both a 'working class hero' (Janin) and a 'civilised Marquis' (Sand). What is also striking, especially in how Pierrot was translated into other, notably higher, artistic media, is how often he is depicted in a context or emotional state that appears to operate against his character, such as sadness or violence. Numerous theories have

been formulated by scholars as to why the sad (or out of character in some other way) clown would have appealed to artists and writers of this period. Borowitz, for instance, surmises that the sad clown was an attractive image for the literary and artistic avant-garde in the first half of the century because it presented a figurative challenge to the Greco-Roman aesthetic conventions privileged by neoclassicism (1984, 23). The presence of a sombre clown in place of a more classical subject in this art could both parody the seriousness of neoclassical art and challenge its claims to cultural superiority. The clown's obvious theatricality also stood in stark contrast to the ideals of the later realists, and so their ability to work against or parody aesthetic styles and discourses carried across the century. Another reason frequently given – which is not entirely separate from the first issue – is that artists identified with the clown's 'outsider' or 'other' status. Like the clown, they were 'forced to please a public which responded with indifference or even hostility' in a period during which, through the expansion of capitalism, the artist's role to create (and please) was being challenged by mass production and shifting perceptions of the economic and cultural value of art more generally (Haskell 1972, 14). This uncertainty was then reflected back in the unhappy looks of the clowns that appeared in artists' work. The unhappiness of the clown depicted, therefore, was a critical gesture directed against the aesthetic hegemonies of this period and a reflection of the increasingly unstable positions professional artists occupied within society.

4. The dream of the artist's life

While Rouault's (un)popular aesthetic certainly develops from these artistic contexts and traditions, his choice to paint clowns appears to have stemmed, in part, from more personal associations. The son of working-class parents, Rouault had been raised in a household that could afford few luxuries. In his biography of the artist, the Italian historian and art critic Lionello Venturi makes the point that popular performance forms such as the circus, where

the young Georges would have seen his first clown, provided periodic but essential respite from the unrelenting hardships the Rouault family faced. As such, '[c]lowns were the dream of Rouault's life', Venturi claims (1959, 21). His evidence for this is Rouault's 1938 book *Le Cirque de l'Etoile Filante*¹³ where the artist would write of his fondness of clowns, declaring his envy for, among other things, their freedom to wander (ibid.). The artist's attraction to clowns, therefore, may in part be explained as a complex expression of his working-class past and the essential escapism such figures provided; no doubt these experiences also helped to lay the foundations for his anti-bourgeois political beliefs, and in this regard, it is possible to read the clown's presence in his art politically (although I shall not do so here). It seems possible, too, that the solitarily-inclined Rouault would have identified with a clown's outsider status. Further evidence of Rouault's personal identification with clowns comes from his art. In several of his self-portraits, including *The Workman's Apprentice* (1925) and *Self-Portrait* (1926), for instance, Rouault occupies the subject position as a clown. As with *Clown*, discussed earlier, we find the costumed artist-subject assuming a classic portrait pose, sitting in a relatively dark space with a lighting source highlighting the right side of his face and neck. While we may never know exactly why the artist chose to depict himself in this way, what seems clear is that he saw the clown as a figure well suited to his expressionism, even at the most personal level.

But Rouault was also attracted to images of clowns because of the aesthetic opportunities they afforded him. The clown for Rouault was a figure whose very clearly marked theatricality and widely recognised cultural role and popular status (that is: as 'entertainer') made them an ideal figure for exploring the social masks human beings wear. This is confirmed in a letter that Rouault wrote to his friend, the symbolist writer Edouard

¹³ Translation: *Circus of the Shooting Star*. To date, the book has never appeared in English. The quotes I use in the section are Emmons' translation of Venturi's text.

Schuré, in 1905. In the letter, Rouault describes having seen '[a] gypsy wagon stopped along the road, [with an] emaciated horse grazing on the thin grass, [and an] old clown sitting on the corner of his wagon mending his bright many-coloured costume' (quoted in Dyrness 1971, 149). Rouault thought the contrast produced in this moment was rich with possibility.

The letter continued:

This contrast between brilliant and scintillating things made to amuse us, and this infinitely sad life, if one looks at it objectively, struck me with great force. I have expanded all of this. I saw clearly that the 'clown' was myself, ourselves, almost all of us. This spangled costume is given to us by life. We are all of us clowns, more or less, we all wear a 'spangled costume', but if we are caught by surprise, the way I caught that old clown, oh then; who would dare to claim he is not moved deeply by immeasurable pity? My failing (if it is one, in any case it is the source of immense suffering for me) is never to let anyone keep on his 'spangled costume'. Be he King or Emperor, what I want to see in the man facing me is his soul, and the more exalted his position, the more I fear for his soul. (ibid.)

It is unknown whether the events described in Rouault's letter actually occurred, or whether it was an imagined scene that attempted to give voice to aesthetic changes that were taking place inside the artist at a pivotal moment of his career, but what comes across quite strongly here is Rouault's personal desire to unmask and de-spangle his subject in order to reveal them in their most human and raw form (if not, somehow, their 'soul'). What this moment or imagined scene showed Rouault was that the strongly encoded iconography of the clown allowed for easy amplification of the performer's vulnerability when sitting outside of a performative context. Even sitting neutrally and without emotion, as *Clown*, discussed earlier, does, the subject's pose and demeanour, not to mention the overall aesthetic, are incongruous with our expectations of what a clown *should* be doing, and we are therefore inclined to question the figure's mood or emotional state. In his paintings, Rouault's harsh compositional expressionism which distorts and may even appear to dehumanise the subject was intended to extend and complicate our viewing further. It is this element in particular which so clearly instates Bourdieu's 'gap' between content and form, transforming the clown's popular image and its wider associations into something less familiar, opaque, and as a consequence

(un)popular. Rouault's *clownoclasm* – the principal means by which his Bourdieuan 'gap' is introduced – produced through the thick layers of paint, the running inks and oils, and the general figurative distress was his aesthetic attempt to expose – and perhaps, at times, even condemn – the modern human soul plastically and an invitation for viewers to hunt for deeper, spiritual meaning beyond superficial appearances. What is clear is that the popular element's role in this 'high art' aesthetic is essential, as our experience of – and ability to decipher – the work pivots on our understanding of the role and function of clowns from popular art forms. This is why, for me, Rouault's paintings present a particularly good example of (un)popular art.

There are several important points which might be drawn from reading Rouault's work as (un)popular in the way I have set out here. The first is that doing so has amplified the role the popular plays in Rouault's aesthetic. The clown here provides a known theatrical counterpoint to Rouault's concern for (and distrust of) the modern world. Not only was the nineteenth and early twentieth century clown, as both a representative of commercial culture and its victim, an ideal candidate for Rouault's artistic and religious critique, the effectiveness of his expressionism appears to considerably depend on the relational aesthetic experience invoked by their appearance in his paintings. A second point that might be drawn from the analysis is that the (un)popular as exemplified by Rouault's work poses a challenge to the modern art/avant-garde formulations of Greenberg and Gasset. Rouault appears to have had no intention of dehumanising his subjects in the way Gasset suggests was common to modern art. On the contrary, he hoped viewers might locate something fundamentally human at the centre of his 'dehumanising' aesthetic. Indeed, as the (un)popular has been configured here, one's knowledge of the popular, and the typically 'human' responses one might have to it, are expected to be drawn upon in order to engage with the paintings. Finally, I believe that Rouault's work further problematizes Greenberg's cleaved categorisation of avant-garde and

popular (or ‘kitsch’) culture. Instead of being culturally and ideologically incompatible, in artistic terms they can and did mutually inform one another. This seems to provide further support for literary critic Peter Bürger’s interpretation of the avant-garde in which he acknowledges that far from excluding mass and popular cultural forms, avant-garde artists openly co-opted and integrated it into their art (Bürger 1984, 47–49). Rouault’s work very clearly does this. The concept of the (un)popular, therefore, allows us to make that connection clear – and to place emphasis, where it is due, on the popular’s essential role in that relationship.

5. ‘The history of painting is nothing but the history of vision’¹⁴

From 1920, at the age of 49, Rouault’s work began to receive more consistently positive notices. By the end of the decade he would have major exhibitions open in New York, London, Chicago and Munich. Rather than grotesque monsters, his subjects took on a new beauty in the interwar period. As Schloesser, drawing on Andre Salmon’s review of Rouault’s exhibition at the Galerie Licorne in Paris in 1920, notes: ‘The suffering and the ugliness’ were no longer dead-ends but rather the (literally) God-given material out of which Rouault created his unique beauty’ (Schloesser 2005, 228). While the positive critical and public attention his work received pleased Rouault, he was also disappointed that fame had come so late. ‘Everything people see in my painting was already there when I was forty,’ he claimed (quoted in George and Nouaille-Rouault 1971, 88). ‘Why did people not seek me out then?’ (ibid.). Rouault would die in 1958 at the age of 86 having enjoyed over thirty years of internationally-recognised success as an artist.

Rouault’s declared frustrations over his late fame remind me of Austrian writer and critic Hermann Bahr’s observations on painting. ‘The history of painting is nothing but the

¹⁴ This quote is from Herman Bahr’s *Expressionism* (2003, 117).

history of vision – or seeing’, he writes (2003, 117). ‘Technique changes only when the mode of seeing has changed’ (ibid.). For Rouault, his technique preceded the cultural optical change that the First World War would sadly and profoundly usher in. Post-war eyes could find sense within Rouault’s figurative distress, which led to a greater tolerance for, and even an appreciation of, his rough beauty. This, of course, did not mean his aesthetic became popular; its continued opacity – his *clownoclasm* – would prevent that. If anything, the wide critical attention he received in the later years of his life, it could be argued, made his work even more elitist. In this way, his art was and continues to be (un)popular in the most essential sense; in being so, it tries desperately to remind us that ‘we are all of us clowns, more or less [...]’ (Dyrness 1971, 149).

Figure 1: Rouault, Georges (1871-1958): *Clown*, 1912. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Oil on canvas, 35 3/8 x 26 7/8 in. (89.8 x 68.2cm). Gift of Nate B. and Frances Spingold. Acc. n.: 79.1958. ©2018. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

Figure 2: Rouault, Georges (1871-1958): *Parade* (c. 1907-1910). Paris, Centre Pompidou - Musée National d'art Moderne - Centre de Creation Industrielle. Watercolor, oil, ink and pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 25 1/2 x 39 2/5 in. (65 x 100 cm). (C) ADAGP, Paris. Photo (C) Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migeat.

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